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ABSTRACT

Career development is an inherently spiritual process. Yet many career development professionals and personal coaches shy away from any discussion of spirituality in their work. This places the career professional in a dilemma: How does one practice a spiritual occupation, but never discuss the central issue? To escape this dilemma, the author suggests that career development professionals need an understanding of spirituality that transcends the borders of religion, and a vocabulary with which to articulate ideas with others. Moreover, they need a framework that is at the same time both broad enough to facilitate a universally inclusive discussion and, simultaneously, sophisticated enough to remain valuable. The author offers the R.O.P.E.S. framework as a practical approach to spirituality, designed to facilitate such an inclusive discussion. (GCP)

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Career Spirituality – Learning the R.O.P.E.S.

by
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Career Spirituality – Learning the R.O.P.E.S.

Rabbi Moshe Fine

Preface

Career development is an inherently spiritual process. Yet, many career development professionals and personal coaches shy away from any discussion of spirituality in their work. The reason for this is perhaps because spirituality is tied to religion, and we live in a society that values a separation of religion from state and other aspects of public life. We are uncomfortable mixing religion into our profession, and we are afraid of offending others who do not share our faith. This places the career professional in a dilemma: How does one practice a spiritual occupation, but never discuss the central issue?

To escape this dilemma, we need an understanding of spirituality, which transcends the borders of religion, and we need a vocabulary with which to articulate our ideas with others. Moreover, we need a framework that is at same time both broad enough to facilitate a universally inclusive discussion and, simultaneously, sophisticated enough to remain valuable. The R.O.P.E.S. offers such a framework. It is a practical approach to spirituality, designed to facilitate such an inclusive discussion. Indeed, the R.O.P.E.S. will empower you with the ability to integrate concepts of spirituality and meaning into your career and your life, and it will assist you in helping others do the same.

Introduction

A football player once asked the great coach, Vince Lombardi, to play on his team. The player said that football was his top priority. Lombardi replied, "With that attitude, you won't play on my team. On my team, it has to be G-d first, family second, and only then football!"

Many people pay lip-service to the idea of ordering their priorities with noble values first and only then list their work. A person might say that he or she puts family first, but then put in 60 or 70 hours at the office. In reality, for many of us, there is a great disparity between our stated values and how we live our lives. Moreover, even the most sincere person cannot escape the fact that they are likely to spend much more time at work than they could ever hope to spend with "G-d first, family second."

So, it would seem that we are all a little dishonest in how we structure our lives. And you cannot simply say, "Well, I have to organize my life this way. After all, I need to feed my family," because even the Vince Lombardi's of this world, who have plenty of money in the bank and, if they so chose, could spend more time at home and in church or synagogue, choose instead to play football!

Our careers, whether we admit it or not, are the dominant factors in our lives. This is so true that, for most of us, "who we are" is synonymous with "what we do." Therefore, gaining perspective about the role of career in our lives is important. In addition, since many of us truly aspire to the ideal of attaining life-work balance, we need an approach to dealing with career issues. To achieve these ends, one must examine the spiritual dimension of career.

Now you might be thinking, "What does spirituality have to do with work? Why should I care about the spiritual quality of my career? I am not a priest or rabbi. Let's leave the spiritual for the house of prayer."

To this, the response is simple – career satisfaction is at its core a spiritual issue. If all "career" meant was making money, then finding a job and being happy in it would be a simple mechanical formula: We would do what our father's did or whatever society chose for us. We would do what we were trained to do, and no one would like what they did more or less than anyone else. Furthermore, if career meant only money, then people would retire once they achieved financial security. The fact is, though, that life is not that simple, and successful people do not stop working.

Deep down, we each have an overwhelming drive to feel a sense of meaning in what we do with our lives. We need to know that there is a purpose to our existence and that we have contributed something to the world for having been here. We desire to fulfill our potential. And these issues are spiritual ones. Therefore, we can no more divorce the concept of spirituality from a discussion of career than we can separate the concept of air from a discussion about breathing. There is no career satisfaction without spiritual fulfillment. Moreover, once we understand the spiritual connection between what we do and who we are, we might even be able to structure our lives to reflect our true values.

Doing this – achieving career spirituality - is a five-step process. All it takes is learning the R.O.P.E.S.

R - REAL

To begin, we have to address a fundamental issue. Entering a discussion of career spirituality requires making a BIG assumption. That is, we must assume that there is such a thing as the spiritual. We must assume that people can have "spiritual experiences" that are something more than a figment of their imaginations.

This is the starting point of career spirituality. The first step to learning the R.O.P.E.S. is recognizing that spirituality is something real. "R" is for real.

Realness implies that the spiritual realm has a structure associated with it. By definition, anything real has structure and is governed by immutable laws. Just as there are laws of nature, such as physics and biology, which govern the physical world, so too there are spiritual laws, which govern the spiritual world. Just as when an object falls, the laws of physics demand that gravity pull it down, so too spiritual experiences must be guided by certain absolute principles of the spiritual realm. The alternative is to say that spirituality is chaotic, and chaos is nonexistence. However, if spirituality is real and has structure, then it can be studied, understood and accessed. It also follows that the human drive for spirituality is for something real. Spiritual needs are real, which really must be met. Appreciating the realness of your own needs is the first step to learning the R.O.P.E.S.

O – Omni

After appreciating the realness of the need for spiritual fulfillment, the next step to learning the R.O.P.E.S. is to gain some insight into the nature of the spiritual. This insight is the "O" of the R.O.P.E.S. "O" stands for omni.

One basic attribute that nearly all people ascribe to the spiritual is its quality of being "omni." When people attempt to describe G-d, the infinite, or other concepts connected with the spiritual, they use descriptors like all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-encompassing. We instinctively recognize that the spiritual has an "omni-ness" to it. It is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, everywhere, in everyplace, and transcending the borders of space and time.

This "omni" quality of the spiritual is what enables life to have meaning. Matis Weinberg explains that when we say something is meaningful, we are expressing that it shares a deep connection to something else. An event, such as a birth, is meaningful because we sense through it our connection to something greater than ourselves – such as the greater cycle of life and death and renewal that we are all a part of. Our careers are meaningful, when we perceive through them the impact we have on the reality outside the four walls of our offices. These connections result from the omni-ness of the spiritual - its all-encompassing nature, which connects seemingly disassociated aspects of creation. The degree of meaning that we ascribe to a particular event relates to the intensity of interconnectedness that we perceive.

To better understand, consider the case of a man witnessing the birth of his child.[1] He may leave saying that the experience was one of the most

profound of his life. The fact that the nurse, who assisted the delivery, described it to a colleague as standard and uneventful does not lessen the realness of his experience. Similarly, that nurse might attend a film and be moved to tears. Afterward, if she calls her colleague and excitedly describes the film as one of the most deeply meaningful ones she had ever seen, it would not detract from her experience to know that the new father was a movie critic, who had written a scathing review of the same movie.

Given this dichotomy in experiences, one might conclude that the nurse and the movie critic are sensing two different "meanings." However, when we consider the omni-ness of the spiritual, we realize that both had insights into the same interconnectedness of existence. The father and the nurse actually experienced the *same* meaning, albeit along different paths. Whereas the existence of a spiritual connection between all of existence is absolute, each individual perceives this connection in a manner relative to their own personality. Different people "tune in" to different experiences.

Spirituality is real. It is all-powerful and everywhere, but each of us is sensitive to it in different ways. When we ask for meaningful careers, we are seeking work that enables us, individually, to sense the interconnectedness between who we are and what we do and how this fits into the world.

P - Paths

The first two steps in learning the R.O.P.E.S. are appreciating that spirituality is real and understanding its attribute of being omni. The next step is to explore the various *paths* open to a person to connect to this level of reality. These paths are the "P" of the R.O.P.E.S., and there are four of them.

The first is luck! It is the epiphany or transcendental experience – the sudden perception of the essential nature of something. This is the event that we usually think of when entering into a conversation about spiritual experiences. It can be a prophetic experience or the heightened awareness experienced by a mystic. During such experiences, people report sensing an insight into reality as whole *as well as* their place in the greater scheme of things.

The reason that this first path is labeled "luck" is because there seems to be a randomness in how and when these visions occur. The truth is, though, that such experiences normally result from sustained and concentrated effort. There may be an unusual event when a person is given the gift of such an epiphany, however they are usually not divorced from the circumstances in which they occur. There is something about prayer and meditation which facilitates these types of experiences. A person may not have such an experience during every prayer or meditative

session, but it is not surprising that someone who meditates regularly has these experiences more than someone who does not. Anyone who has had such an experience should record the steps leading up to it. In this way, the experience can be recreated.

The second path to spirituality is grandeur.[2] This path is often associated with nature. Being in the presence of great vistas, powerful waterfalls, and sunsets stirs within us deep feelings. But, grandeur is not limited to nature; it exists in other settings such as stately courthouse buildings, ancient ruins, and mass crowds of people.

The reason that grand things invoke within us spiritual feelings is because they get us in touch with the "omni-ness" of the spiritual dimension on a primal level. The raw power of Niagara Falls, for example, invokes in us the all-powerfulness of the spiritual dimension. When we see a sunset or look into the expanse of a star-filled night sky, we may connect to the harmony of the spiritual. These feelings result from the omni-ness of the spiritual.

The movie *Grand Canyon* expressed this idea in an interesting way. This movie was about people and everyday life in Los Angeles. Nonetheless, the characters sensed hints to greater meaning in the events of their lives. When trying to describe these feelings, the characters were limited to comparing them to the sense of awe that one has while viewing the Grand Canyon. The movie ends with the main characters gathered at the Grand Canyon to recapture this sensation.

On one hand, the view of spirituality expressed in the movie is quite shallow. We would be limited creatures if a big hole in the ground were the end all, be all, of our spiritual existence. On the other hand, the movie expressed an extremely profound idea. The movie connected the sense of meaning that people have in disassociated events with the feelings experienced in nature as expressions of the same reality, and that is deep! Grandeur is simply readily accessible opening to the spiritual realm.

This leads to the third spiritual path – elevation. Elevation is the ability to perceive spirituality in seemingly inconsequential things, or non-grand events. The fact is that owing to the omni-ness of the spiritual, everything has a spiritual quality to it. Therefore, our emotions should not just be stirred by grand things. The mundane should also offer a glimpse into the divine.

Nechemia Coopersmith explains that the reason we do not grasp the spiritual in the mundane is because we have become jaded. We have assimilated into the back recesses of our minds the utter uniqueness of the world around us. We therefore are generally unable to use the ordinary as a window to greater reality. Children, however, do not suffer from this deficiency.

One windy day when my eldest daughter was about five, she looked out

the window and exclaimed, "The trees are dancing!" My wife looked out and saw the trees being blown by the wind. My daughter did not realize that the wind was causing the movement. She thought the trees were actually dancing. And, the truth is, she was right. The mundane is quite magnificent.

The world offers unlimited opportunities for insight and meaning. Sensitizing ourselves to these opportunities and allowing ourselves to perceive meaning in the mundane is an act of elevation. By seeing the interconnectedness of reality in something as ordinary as dancing trees, we elevate the moment to being truly special.

The fourth path to spirituality is self-actualization. Now it might seem odd that involvement with self could be a spiritual endeavor, but this phenomenon is implicit from the classical spiritual epiphany. Integral to these experiences is perceiving a sense of one's own place in the scheme of things. Achieving such self-identity as part of one's daily outlook is an even greater spiritual level.

The movie *Patton*, about General George Patton during World War II, well-expresses this idea. In one scene, Patton is driving along a road in Northern Africa when he takes a detour. Patton reaches a clearing, where he recounts the details of battle two thousand years before, involving a Roman legion. When he finishes, the person he is talking to says, "It sounds like you were there." Patton replies, "I was."

Later Patton is removed from his command. As the Allies are preparing for the invasion of Normandy, Patton says something like, "It cannot be that the whole world is at war and I am not a part of it." Patton saw his destiny as leading a great army into battle. Therefore, when he was reinstated and given command of an Allied army, he deeply sensed the fulfillment of his purpose. His attainment of such self-actualizion was profoundly spiritual.

In summary, the "P" of the R.O.P.E.S. is these four paths – luck, grandeur, elevation, and self-actualization.

E – Elevating Our Careers

The next step to learning the R.O.P.E.S. is applying the concept of elevation to our careers. "E" is for elevating our careers. It focuses on how to transform our daily routines into a spiritual endeavor.

Previously, we discussed the concept of "elevation" in terms of perspective. The third path to spirituality requires changing how we view the details of life, such as dancing trees, so that we sense in them the same feelings of awe that we normally reserve for grander things, like the Grand Canyon. In this way, we achieve spiritual elevation through perception. However, it is also possible to achieve elevation through action. This is done by connecting what we do to its impact on the world around us.

All of our actions have the potential to be ultimately meaningful. Since all of reality shares an intrinsic connection through the spiritual plain of existence, our actions deeply affect the world around us. In fact, there is nothing that we could ever do that would not have an impact on all of existence! All of our actions – even the most inconsequential – impact our city, our country, and the environment. Every action we take reverberates throughout the universe, because everything shares an intrinsic connection to everything else!

Because our actions have such potential, each one of us has tremendous responsibility. This responsibility results in humanity sharing a common purpose. This purpose is expressed in the Hebrew phrase *Tikkun Olam* – fixing the world. Each one of us has an obligation to somehow add or contribute to the world around us. When a person realizes this, that their actions have tremendous power and they have awesome responsibility, even the most trivial acts become spiritually uplifting.

There is a story in Jewish lore which brings out this idea. Toward the beginning of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, there is a list of the 10 generations that lived from Adam until Noah. The Bible records that the people of these generations lived exceedingly long lives. Adam, for example, lived 930 years. By contrast, one person, Enoch, lived an appreciably shorter life - a mere 365 years. In addition, this person did not die, but was "taken" by G-d. The story explains that Enoch lived in a generation when humanity was becoming corrupt but because he was particularly righteous, G-d took him before his time so that he would not be influenced by those around him.

Of particular interest is why Enoch was accounted as righteous. Enoch was a shoemaker and with each stitch in making a pair of shoes, he would concentrate that the purpose of his action was to make a comfortable pair of shoes so that its wearer could go about doing good deeds. In essence, Enoch was righteous because he connected each of his actions to a greater purpose and made each one holy.

This same potential exist for all of us. There is nothing that we can do that does not have a deep and meaningful impact on everything. Even our simplest actions have tremendous import. Thus, career spirituality begins with attitude and intention. It requires recognizing the effect of our actions beyond ourselves. When we sense this connection between what we do and its impact on the world, and when we focus our actions to have a positive affect, we experience spiritual elevation.

S – Self-Actualization Through Career

This brings us to the final step in learning the R.O.P.E.S. "S" is the fourth spiritual path, self-actualization, applied to career. "S" is spiritual satisfaction that comes from truly connecting who we are to what we do.

In addition to our general purpose of fixing the world, each of us has a specific purpose, which is unique to us. This purpose explains why *I am* here – why I am alive; why I was born with my specific talents and challenges; and why I was not born as someone else, with a different set of attributes. This specific purpose, or mission in life, is different for each individual. However, discovering this mission can be a most difficult task. Helping people achieve this level of spirituality is the awesome responsibility of the career development field.

Fortunately, as Dick Bolles points out in *What Color is Your Parachute*, the universe has been kind and given us clues to guide us. These clues are hinted to in the very challenge itself – a person's specific purpose is to take what they have been given and to apply it. The way a person identifies their particular purpose is by going through a process of self-assessment. It is also a matter of following one's dreams. It is the important work and focus of the career development professional. When a person achieves this, when they connect who they are to what they do, nothing can offer a more sustained feeling of spiritual satisfaction.

Conclusion

In setting forth the equation of career spirituality in this way, some people may be a little disappointed. Many people limit their concept of spiritual experiences to the intense, but short-lived, transcendental epiphany. Such a person may feel let down by this practical approach.

In response, consider that the need for self-actualization is a primary human need, which is intensely spiritual by nature. Furthermore, when unfulfilled, the sense of lacking reverberates into other aspects of life. So much so, that it can block one's ability to experience spirituality along other paths. A person who is frustrated in searching for their purpose has little chance of being able to elevate the smaller aspects of life, because in truth, it is very difficult to be a shoemaker, or to focus the monotonous aspects of any job in an elevated fashion, when a person does not sense how the little things connect to who they are. Likewise, such a person is apt to overlook even the grander moments of life, such as sunsets or summer days, because they are distracted. Such a person is also unlikely to experience anything along the first path.

On the other hand, when a person feels that what they are doing is a reflection of something deeper, of who they really are, then they are more likely to connect the little things to their greater impact. Menial chores are more likely to be meaningful. Likewise, a person who is fulfilled on this level is more likely to notice the grand events happening around them, and they are even more likely to experience an epiphany at work.

A first path experience at work is like being "in the zone."[3] Being in

the zone is the ultimate experience for a basketball player. It is that moment in the middle of a game when time stands still. Every shot goes in the basket, and every leap is six inches higher than ever before. It is when the ball and player become one.

In truth, such moments are available in all careers. This is when everything is going your way. Every sales call is a winner, and time passes without notice. You miss lunch and only snap out of the trance when your stomach growls at dinnertime. At these moments, the intensity of the experience, and your ability to perceive the pleasure in what is happening, is directly proportional to the degree to which you have come to make what you do a reflection of who you are. This is career spirituality.

Career spirituality is where who you are meets what you do and it connects to the world beyond yourself. When you achieve this, not only will you have career satisfaction, but your career will reflect of your values as well. All you need to do is grab hold of the R.O.P.E.S.!

Footnotes

[1] This example is taken from R'Matis Weinberg's tape series, *Lifechoice*.

[2] The concept of grandeur as expressed here was inspired by a lecture and essay by R' Nechemia Coopersmith.

[3] This example is inspired by a story in Andy Leftkowitz's, *From Fear to Eternity*. Israel Book Shop (2002).

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